

## Job placement: Why it must start with employment and end with decent pay



You've no doubt seen it before. A job ad, disguised as a call for interns, with a list of role requirements as long as your arm. Several of which you're pretty sure fall within the definitely more-senior ambit. Remuneration? Well...nothing. But do not despair: the job - sorry, internship - promises an "amazing opportunity" for growth.

Of course, the sarcasm is not intended to dispute the value that a genuine internship or learnership programme offers to young people at the precipice of entering the working world. This rite of passage is essential in helping learners gain the necessary experience and training that will contribute to their earning a proper salary in a good job someday. However, what I do take issue with is exploiting young labour in what should clearly be a paid position. At the very least, a fair stipend should be mandatory to cover the cost of transportation to and from the office, as well as other costs incurred by the learner. Sadly, in the South African (SA) context, this means that our youth are ripe for exploitation. Youth unemployment sits at a staggering 66,5%. Around two-thirds of the young people in SA are without work. We also have the world's highest Gini coefficient - a universal yardstick of statistical dispersion intended to represent the wealth inequality within a nation or a social group. In other words, SA has the most severe disparity between rich and poor in the world. Eye-opening. Jaw-dropping. Hair-raising. These are the kinds of cold, hard facts that do all the things to one's face.

Then, juxtapose the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Labour Organisation has listed several reasons why youth were hardest hit by the pandemic. This includes the fact that young people were overrepresented in sectors most impacted by the lockdown; were more likely to embark in 'non-standard' and less stable forms of employment; and were at greater risk of having their salaries cut. Given this, it's not surprising to see the current prevalence of job creation and placement programmes that aim to guide youth into gainful employment. This, of course, is a Very Good Thing. And sorely

needed. However, because of the desperate demand for jobs and their relative scarcity, we often find ourselves in a situation where young people are financially exploited – often inadvertently and without malicious intent – by their employers. Furthermore, it is not enough that we celebrate the mere existence of job placement programmes; we need to interrogate and assess them to ensure that they are doing what we need them to. Which is, to upskill and secure employment for youth, which offers competitive remuneration.

What is competitive remuneration? This is defined as a salary that is in-line with labour laws as well as the industry benchmark for similar jobs in that same geographical region.

As head of Youth Employment, which forms part of Momentum Metropolitan's Corporate Social Investment (CSI) mandate, a key function of my portfolio is sourcing non-profit organisation (NPO) partners that have demonstrated consistent success in job placement, establishing effective networks with roots that reach deeply into the communities that our business serves. Selection is congruent with our agenda of driving transformation for marginalised groups, with a focus on race, gender, and disability.

Our mandate certainly does not end at employment. It also incorporates the need for competitive remuneration.

Oftentimes, a conflict arises between our ideals and the reality of the context in which we operate. While we promote an agenda that sees young individuals earn a living wage, within certain regions and sectors this proves more challenging.

This is where we, as private sector, need to step into the role of a genuine partner. We need to empower our NPOs to drive forward our vision, through educating their employment partners on the need for a fair wage that advances transformation and does not simply create a class of working poor.

Over the past few years, the Momentum Metropolitan Foundation has championed a 'Hierarchy of Intent', defining our core focus areas. This prioritises the placement of young people within the ICT sector where possible and opportunity allows, given the growth potential as well as the ability to earn a decent living wage.

One area where NPOs and the private sector have consistently got it wrong is treating internships as job placement. Learnerships or internships are a key part of the employability journey, and they should serve as the workplace experience phase of our programmes. But, these are not actual, paying jobs. We cannot count these as job placements in our programmes, and consider our work done once a young person is in an internship.

With the current high levels of employment, job placement programmes need to focus on jobs that allow learners the opportunity to acquire skills that result in their earning a living wage while creating pathways for growth and career progression.

We need to prioritise job placement programmes based on skills that are in demand. We don't need more

programmes that train for the sake of training - we need programmes with employment, advancement, and fair remuneration as the end goal.